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First Responders

Natural disaster or terrorist attack,
pharmacists are a vital part of relief efforts

Erin Mullen,
assistant vice
president of
Rx Response

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Alaina Scott

Inside the trunk of Lee Joffee's car is a suitcase packed with combat boots and a camouflage uniform, neatly folded and waiting to be worn. He's not in the military. The suitcase means that Joffee is prepared for the next disaster, natural or otherwise.

As a member of one of 100 medical relief teams, Joffee must be on the road within six hours of notification to deploy after disaster strikes. "We just never know when we're going to go," Joffee said. "You really need to be ready all of the time."

Like Joffee, hundreds of pharmacists throughout the United States assisted in some way with relief efforts following Hurricanes Gustav and Ike in September. Some pharmacies donated funds. Some pharmacists left their homes to help provide medication to victims, while several organizations came together to support the continued delivery of drugs to people who desperately needed them.

"Pharmacists play a really crucial part of hurricane relief efforts," Joffee said. "You never know what illnesses, outbreaks, or reactions people are going to have during a national or state emergency. Pharmacists can help patients get the medications they need in those situations."

Disaster veteran

Joffee, an RPh and deputy commander of the New York-2 branch of the Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT), first got involved with emergency relief in the mid-'90s when he was asked to assess New York City's preparedness for a terrorist attack. "It was interesting, because I found out that I knew just about nothing, even though I was a really well-informed

pharmacist," he recalled. "I could tell you what you take for your pneumonia, but I had no idea what the antidote for anthrax was at that point. I found that really scary."

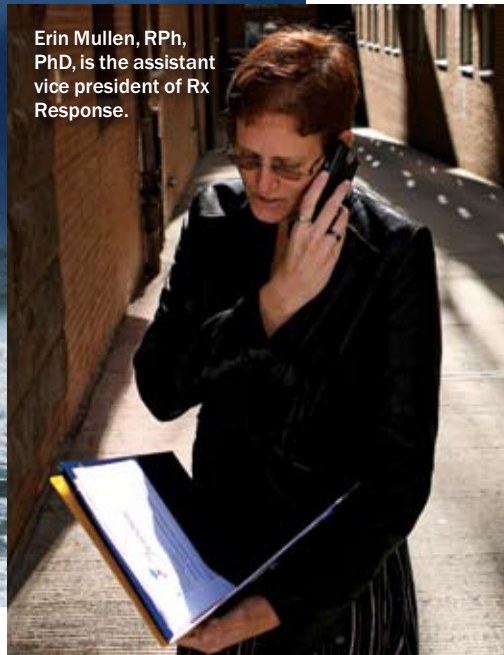
Joffee eventually joined DMAT, a network of national medical relief teams funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that is called in to assist with efforts when local resources are overwhelmed. The first major effort he assisted with came on Sept. 11, 2001, with the terrorist attacks in New York. "And now I guess I've been to every disaster since," he said.

This year, he deployed to Texas as the pharmacist leader on the incident response coordinating team following Hurricane Gustav. He had to ensure that teams had appropriate materials to transport medications and supplies to get them to DMAT field members. It also was his responsibility to notify the state pharmacy association and the local branches of the Drug Enforcement Agency of DMAT's presence.

After a week in Texas, he was deployed to Puerto Rico when it looked as if Hurricane Ike would hit San Juan. He transported pharmaceuticals to the island. "It's really difficult to supply an island with pharmaceuticals post-disaster," Joffee said. "So we moved a great deal of material in there pre-disaster in hopes that we would be ready for it."



Rx Response is a point of contact for the entire pharmaceutical supply system. It relies on a network that enables federal and state emergency management officials to pass information to Rx Response about pharmaceutical needs and other issues that may affect the supply system. These communications are monitored by all segments of the pharmaceutical supply system to ensure resolution.



Erin Mullen, RPh, PhD, is the assistant vice president of Rx Response.

Rx Response members include the American Hospital Association (AHA), the American Red Cross, the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), the Generic Pharmaceutical Association (GPHA), the Healthcare Distribution Management Association (HDMA), the National Association of Chain Drug Stores (NACDS), the National Community Pharmacists Association (NCPA), and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA).

During Hurricanes Ike and Gustav, Rx Response ensured requests were routed to affected areas. The organization helped a distribution center that lost power and needed assistance to maintain refrigeration. And Rx Response gave updates to state emergency centers, American Red Cross centers, and public health departments about locations of open pharmacies so patients in those areas could be informed. "Pharmacies have been recognized as a priority for business restoration in an impacted area," Mullen said. "If the pharmacies aren't open, then the community's not quite ready to re-establish itself."

Disaster pharmacy is extraordinary, Joffe said. It gives pharmacists the opportunity to use skills they rarely get to employ in the "real world." There are no titles, and everyone works as a team, with doctors and pharmacists holding separate responsibilities. "You get to use every skill you have. You have to work with the supplies you have, and the doctors trust you to do what you have to do, and you trust them to do what they have to do. It really is an amazing relationship in the field."



Some pharmacists are members of DMAT.

In the case of Hurricane Gustav, Rx Response officials held numerous conference calls with its members, monitoring developments as the storm unfolded. These calls led to reports detailing loca-

tions of open pharmacies in Louisiana's evacuated areas, giving Louisiana public health officials essential information as they considered whether to permit homeowners to return to affected areas.

At the request of Louisiana public health officials, Mullen was deployed to Louisiana to serve as the liaison between the state's emergency operations center and Rx Response. Rx Response also was in direct contact with several federal agencies, including the Critical Infrastructure and Key Resource Protection Program of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the DHS Private Sector Office, and the Critical Infrastructure Program of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

"Pharmacists can rest assured and know that we're there working for them," Mullen said.

Hospital pharmacist

Laura Pryor, RPh, pharmacy manager at Dubuis Hospital of

Information coordinator

Erin Mullen, RPh, PhD, is the assistant vice president of Rx Response, an organization that makes sure critical medicines are available during disasters. The program, operational for two years, was activated for the first time this year. Mullen said it became obvious after Hurricane Katrina that providing patients with necessary medications would require enhanced communications.

"We're helping ensure the pharmaceutical supply stays robust, and we're helping with those problems that a single company may not be able to address. We're facilitating a lot of information," Mullen said.

Lake Charles, La., wasn't expecting to be deeply involved in hurricane relief efforts, especially after her hospital was evacuated to a sister facility when Hurricane Gustav threatened the area. But she quickly undertook her own effort to safeguard patients needing medications from her hospital pharmacy.

"We had been cleaning and getting ready to reopen — and then Ike came along," Pryor said. Her hospital was spared, but 21 patients from the Texas branch of the Dubuis system had to be evacuated to the branch in Lake Charles.

The pharmacy's technician had resigned the week before the hurricanes hit, and a new one hadn't been hired yet. So Pryor was alone and swamped. Then Hurricane Ike hit the hospital's headquarters and her IT department and server went down. "I had to make a makeshift system, go back to manual and keep charts, and record everything when the server came back."

She added, "I stayed in the pharmacy every day for six days straight for about 11 to 12 hours, trying to keep the meds going out." The situation proved how vital a fallback system is to a hospital's pharmacy, she said.

Corporate contributors

Pharmacies donated money and goods to help the hurricane relief efforts. Among the donors was Rite Aid, which contributed \$75,000 to Gustav relief efforts through the American Red Cross. "Our hearts go out to the victims, families, and communities affected by Hurricane Gustav. I am also very appreciative of all our pharmacists and other associates that worked so hard to keep our stores open and will be reopening stores as soon as that can be done safely," said Mary Sammons, Rite Aid chairman, president, and CEO.

Rite Aid also donated supplies worth \$37,000, including water, snacks, sunscreen, hand sanitizer, and other personal hygiene products, for distribution at evacuee shelters at the request of the Louisiana Capital Area Chapter of the American Red Cross. "One of Rite Aid's core values is to be caring neighbors in the communities we serve," said Mike Seesholtz, Rite Aid regional vice president for Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

Some Rite Aid associates also made a more personal contribution; store cashiers and pharmacists traveled from Tennessee and unaffected areas of Louisiana and Alabama to help at stores in locations hit by Gustav and to assist in reopening additional stores.

Walgreens reopened its Galveston store a week after Hurricane Ike hit, for more information about the reopening of the store, visit www.drug-topics.com to view the Oct. 13 edition of Latebreakers.

Primary caregiver

Just seeing Craig Steinberg, PharmD, on the street wouldn't lead someone to guess that in his free time he saves lives with emergency medications.



Craig Steinberg, PharmD, does not have to accept a mission, but he rarely refuses one.

Steinberg is from San Diego and, like Joffee, a member of a DMAT team, assisted with Hurricane Ike relief efforts. He began by flying to Atlanta, where for two days he waited for deployment orders from the Department of Health and Human Services. When they came, he was on his way to Baton Rouge.

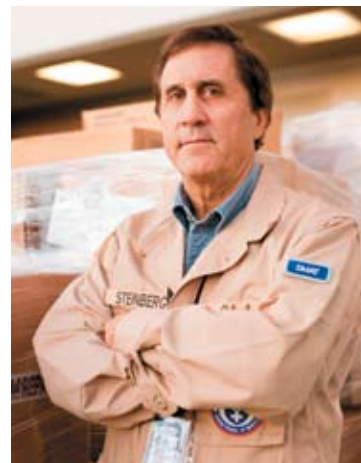
After passing a night in a tent, he went on to Houma, La., where a hospital already had been "ravaged" by Hurricane Gustav. Steinberg was responsible for dispensing medications from a refrigerated 30-foot truck. "Basically I set up a miniature pharmacy in there," he said. Shortly after arriving to help the hospital staff, however, Steinberg's DMAT team was evacuated because Hurricane Ike was headed toward the area. He was then sent to New Orleans, where he spent two nights. The traveling didn't end there; next, the team was moved to Lake Charles on the border of Texas and Louisiana.

As a volunteer, Steinberg is not required to accept a mission with his team. He's always given the option to refuse. He rarely does.

"You really can meet a lot of needs for the patients that are there. The people who are flooded have no medications of any kind. People need their routine medications and some emergency medications, or else they could get sick," he said. "This is my chance to help save a life."

The ability to save lives during a medical disaster gives Steinberg a completely different feeling from the satisfactions of his everyday job as a PharmD. "It's pretty intense," he said. "It gets you out of your normal life." **DT**

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Steinberg helped with Hurricane Gustav.

MAX DOLBERG

"Pharmacists can rest assured and know that we're working for them."

—Erin Mullen, Rx Response



For additional information, visit the following websites:
National Disaster Medical System www.ndms.hhs.gov
Rx Response www.rxresponse.org